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**CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES:  
THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE**

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# CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES: THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

Dr. Mark Falcoff

December 9, 1992

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## FOREWORD

Perhaps no Latin American issue has the potential to affect the United States so explosively as does the crisis in Cuba. After more than three decades of totalitarian rule and hostile relations between Washington and Havana, the Castro regime is crumbling. Yet, surprisingly little effort has been made to think systematically about the implications that this development poses for U.S. interests and policy. In this study, the author examines the premises underlying American policy and asks whether the present strategy is still relevant for dealing with the changing realities on the island. Although he concludes that it is, he also argues that the Cuban problem is likely to be with us for some time. Indeed, the fall of Castro can be expected to unleash a variety of new dilemmas which may prove to be, if anything, even more difficult and dangerous than those associated with the regime's indefinite perpetuation. The author suggests that U.S. policymakers would be well advised to concentrate less on how to oust Fidel—an event which will happen sooner or later in any case—than on how to deal with his doleful legacy once he is gone.

This is the first of several Strategic Studies Institute publications that will deal with the Cuban crisis. These studies were originally prepared in conjunction with the SSI roundtable on "Cuba and the Future," organized by Dr. Donald E. Schulz and held at the U.S. Army War College in January 1992. The papers are being compiled and edited by Dr. Schulz for publication as a book under the same title. The Institute is pleased to publish this report as a contribution to a better understanding of events in this troubled region.

  
GARY L. GUERTNER  
Acting Director  
Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

MARK FALCOFF is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. Among his best-known publications are his book, *Modern Chile, 1970-1989*, and the works he has edited with Robert Royal, *Crisis and Opportunity* and *The Continuing Crisis*, on U.S. policy in Central America and the Caribbean.

## **CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES: THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE**

Since the future of Cuba itself remains in serious doubt, to discuss the prospect for its relations with the United States is something of an exercise in speculation. Let us begin, however, by grasping the few certainties available to us. First, the Castro regime cannot survive the person of the dictator, but as long as he lives he will probably rule, and as long as he rules, the island will undergo no meaningful political changes. Second, having lost its Soviet patron, Cuba can no longer pose the same sort of threat to the United States and its neighbors; this in turn requires a reexamination of the fundamental premises of U.S. policy. Third, the problems for the United States posed by the end of Castroism are probably potentially as great as its indefinite perpetuation. Each of these propositions invites somewhat more extended analysis.

### **Power and Stability in Castro's Cuba.**

To posit fundamental political change in Cuba is to think about the island after the death, disappearance, or forcible exile of the Castro brothers. This may happen later rather than sooner, but since all human beings are mortal, it must happen sometime. Whenever it *does* happen, the existing pressures within Cuba for some sort of political opening are bound to become irresistible. Not all of these pressures will necessarily point in the direction of a Western political and economic model, but they will force the system open and unleash energies and impulses which may be very difficult to contain. President Castro understands this well, which is why he has been so explicit in his rejection of Gorbachev's (and now Yeltsin's) reforms. To date, events in the former Soviet Union have done nothing but bear him out.

To put it bluntly, Castro's interests are first and foremost the perpetuation of his own rule. He understands those interests as best served by the existing system; indeed, he regards the

existing system as essential to his continuation in power. Thus, those who speculate on the possibilities of political change growing out of the status quo in an organic fashion—that is, through evolution or “negotiations”—are simply not taking Fidel seriously. Or rather, they are refusing to confront the realities of power and survival. For the environment in which Castro operates is radically different from that of other Latin American dictators: There are no competing institutions or foreign influences capable of restraining his appetite for power (as there were and are, for example, in General Pinochet's Chile). At the same time, the historical-political context within Cuba itself (and within the nearby Cuban diaspora) render it virtually impossible for Castro to enter into a peaceful retirement. The narrow alternatives of “Socialism or Death” confront the dictator as brutally as they do his hapless people.

This is not, of course, the way the regime itself likes to speculate about the future. Castro frequently refers to the existence of new “revolutionary institutions” which would presumably take over after his death, though in fact for more than 30 years he has been unwilling to allow any of these to acquire a life of its own. The island is still run along the same personalistic lines it was run over three decades ago. Meanwhile, potential rivals (Camilo Cienfuegos, Ernesto Guevara) have tended to disappear, often under mysterious circumstances; others have been driven into exile (Matos, Del Pino); still others, executed (Ochoa). The only two personalities who have survived mention as possible successors have been Castro's brother, Raúl, and his son Fidel Castro Díaz-Balart, head of the Cuban Atomic Energy Commission. [Editor's note: Since this was written, “Fidelito” has been dismissed for “inefficiency.”]<sup>1</sup> At best, this holds out the hope for a dynastic-bureaucratic version of communism whose appeal (and lifespan) would be quite limited.

Spokesmen for the regime frequently insist that even if they cannot predict its precise configuration, some form of Socialist continuity is inevitable after Castro. This is so, they believe, because the regime's putative social achievements (particularly in education and health) have won it the support of the vast majority, but particularly on the part of those who



remember the "bad old" (i.e., pre-revolutionary) days or who belong to groups (Blacks, peasants, cane-cutters, etc.) which were markedly disadvantaged before 1959. Since there are no public opinion polls or elections in Cuba, one cannot know the extent to which these claims are true or false. Nonetheless, the regime's own lack of curiosity—it has resisted calls, for example, for a plebiscite on the Chilean model—does not inspire confidence on the part of most outside observers.

### **U.S.-Cuban Relations: The Constraints on Change.**

Theoretically, of course, there is no reason why Cuba and the United States must base their relationship on the nature of their internal systems. After all, for many years the United States maintained normal (sometimes even cordial) relationships with such erstwhile Socialist countries as Romania, Yugoslavia and Poland, and continues to do so with the People's Republic of China. Unlike those countries, however, the regime in Cuba claims to derive a unique legitimacy—one far surpassing its actual economic or social performance—from its active hostility to the United States and all its works. Indeed, at this point its sole claim to success as a revolutionary project is its effective liberation of Cuba from the U.S. sphere of influence. Normalization of relations would undercut that claim, and also expose the island and its people to potentially destabilizing influences from expanded trade and tourism. Therefore one cannot be certain that normalization is something that Castro really wants, however much he may want the United States to want it. What could be a more delicious "high" for Fidel, after all, than the opportunity to spurn an outstretched hand, or to maneuver the United States into the position of a humiliated suppliant?<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the record shows that in the not very distant past Havana has spurned opportunities, even very modest ones, to improve relations. In the mid-1970s, a round of talks resolved a number of outstanding immigration and hijacking issues and established interest sections in each capital. Indeed, for a brief moment it seemed as if normalization of relations was but a matter of time. But though warned by both the Ford and Carter administrations that further progress was contingent upon

Cuban non-interference in cold war battlefields, Castro chose to deploy thousands of troops in the civil wars of Southern Africa (at one point, as many as 50,000 in Angola). From 1978 on, Cuba was also involved in the transshipment of arms to Marxist revolutionaries in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and probably also to the terrorist left in Chile. These developments shaped a decisively anti-Castro policy by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, one so intense as to survive the original provocations.

For its part, the United States has no interest in making life easier for the Castro regime (as it arguably did similar governments in Eastern Europe during the 1970s, some of which were attempting to distance themselves from Moscow) by widening opportunities for credit and trade or facilitating a massive wave of American tourism. The fact that all three—particularly the latter—might prove ultimately destabilizing over the long term is a moot point, since in the short and even middle run (which could be very long indeed) they would in all probability provide Castro with resources essential to his survival. Liberal critics argue that only by lifting the existing trade embargo is Castro's hold on power likely to be shaken.<sup>3</sup> The Cuban government itself sees matters quite differently, however, since the near totality of its foreign propaganda these days is oriented towards convincing other countries to pressure the United States to lift the embargo.

An early end to economic sanctions is also ruled out by U.S. domestic politics. One of the more enduring side-effects of Castro's revolution has been the creation in this country of a large, affluent, and well-organized Cuban exile community, overwhelmingly opposed to a policy of "dialogue" with the Castro regime.<sup>4</sup> Cuban-Americans constitute the largest voting bloc in the state of Florida, and are an important constituency in New Jersey, California, New York, Massachusetts, and other states rich in electoral votes. On this issue they possess something of a veto, and not merely within the Republican party. In recent years, Castro's persecution of writers, artists, labor leaders, and human rights activists has eroded what little support he had managed to hold within the American liberal community and greatly weakened the case for normalization

within the Democratic party. President-elect Bill Clinton, for example, has stated that he favors maintaining the embargo, as does Senator Claiborne Pell, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who until he reversed himself last year was one of the few congressional supporters of normalization.

To summarize: there is a well-organized, tightly-focused, well-funded constituency for firmness against Castro; there is no real constituency for "dialogue." Thus, for any administration the short- and medium-term benefits of a conciliatory policy are far from evident, while the high political costs—in the short term at least—are immediately apparent.

### **U.S. Policy: The Undesirability of Change.**

Apart from domestic politics, what lies behind U.S. Cuban policy today? At one time, that question was easy to answer: Castro had aligned his country with the Soviet Union and pursued policies both within the region and around the globe which were designed to—and often did—undermine U.S. interests. This included the training of revolutionary cadres, the transfer to them of arms, intelligence information, and financial resources, as well as the deployment of a considerable political influence in what used to be called the Third World and at international organizations.

None of these conditions presently exist: The Soviet Union has disappeared from the political map; Russian aid to Cuba has fallen far below even the promised (lower) levels for 1990 and 1991; and the prospects for relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States is even more problematic. Even within this hemisphere, the Cuban reach is greatly reduced, thanks to the defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections in Nicaragua and the recent Salvadoran peace agreements. Cuban influence at the United Nations and other world bodies is greatly diminished. At a recent meeting with former U.S. and Soviet officials and scholars in Havana to discuss the Missile Crisis, Castro even claimed to have abandoned his policy of subversion against his neighbors, though the sheer number of small arms stockpiled on the island

suggest a continued capacity to export violence if that is the direction that the leadership decides to take.

Even at its worst, a Cuba of this latter sort would still be a more manageable problem than the kind American policymakers have had to confront over the past three decades. But to welcome it back to the inter-American family, as it is today and with no questions asked, would fly in the face of U.S. policy in the rest of the region as it has evolved over the past dozen years—from "business as usual" with dictators to a greater concern for human rights and democracy. An unconditional normalization of relations would overturn the bipartisan consensus forged on these issues and undermine the credibility of U.S. policy in other countries where democratic institutions are still fragile. (If we can "live" with Cuba, why then could we not as easily live with reemergent right-wing military regimes in Central America?) At a minimum, one would have to explain why U.S. policy towards Cuba—a country where there is no free press, where there are no opposition parties, and where elections have not been held in nearly four decades—should be significantly more indulgent than the standard currently applied to other countries. It would, in effect, allow Castro to determine his own standards for political legitimacy, rather than compel him to conform to those established for the region as a whole.<sup>5</sup> And it would push U.S. policy in a direction very different from that in which inter-American diplomatic opinion has been moving of late—the prime examples being the nearly unanimous support within the Organization of American States for the embargo of Haiti after the 1991 deposition of an elected president, and the sanctions currently being levied against the quasi-de facto government in Peru.

#### **U.S. Strategy and the Cuban Exile Factor.**

Critics of U.S. policy often point out that the embargo and other sanctions do not guarantee political change on the island. Of course this is true, at least in the limited sense that no policy can ever offer iron-clad assurances of success. On the other hand, never have the conditions been more favorable. Until now the effects of the embargo have been blunted by Soviet

aid; it will be several years, at least, before the policy has been tested in the new context. The presumption upon which the embargo now operates is that at some point the living standard of the island will drop so dramatically as to encourage elements within the regime—particularly the police and the military—to intervene and reverse the country's political course.

The actual scenarios vary. Some observers foresee popular unrest fueled by shortages, which the armed forces would find themselves morally unable to suppress and which they would eventually join, as in Russia in 1917. Others speak of dissatisfaction within the field-grade ranks of the army—or even the ranks of noncommissioned officers, as in Cuba, 1933—which would congeal into a palace coup. Still others envision a *coup de main* by the highest ranks of the Revolutionary Armed Forces. It is true that the regime so far has demonstrated that its survival does not depend upon a satisfactory economic performance; but the end of Soviet aid will for the first time affect the special privileges of the nomenklatura, both civil and military, the only group capable of forcing a change of course.

A more telling criticism, which even some Cuban-Americans have begun to voice, is that Washington has failed to offer visible incentives to people within the regime—particularly the military—to take action. As long as the crucial second tier of civil and military officials sees its very survival as being associated with that of the leader, it is not likely to rush into precipitous action. There is also a genuine fear of "Miami"—a presumptively revanchist Cuban exile community, which would take over the island and indiscriminately purge those who have collaborated with the regime, even those in fairly minor positions.

The first of these concerns is wholly valid, and points to a deficiency in American policy for which, however, there may be no correction: namely, the inability to operationalize a transition in Cuba. Indeed, U.S. officials can hardly conceptualize what a transition would even look like. Certainly at a minimum it would mean an end to the rule of the Castro brothers and some gestures towards political liberalization, but who would initiate such changes and under what conditions

cannot be confidently foreseen. The United States continues to be guided by the notion that it will know a post-Castro government when it sees it. As for any assurances that would-be Cuban *golpistas* might seek or want, they may not even be Washington's to grant.

Fear of the exile community is greatly overdrawn, though Washington cannot effectively make that point without appearing to be insulting. No doubt some elements are obsessed by events on the island and dream of returning to resume lives, fortunes, and a sense of place which in truth can never be retrieved. Even so, the idea of exiles "taking over" the island (By military force? A boat-lift in reverse? Through purchase?) and dispensing favors, justice, and property finds little support among those who presumably would be most intimately involved in the process. The most recent survey of the Cuban-American community in Dade County, Florida,<sup>6</sup> the epicenter of the diaspora, reveals that the overwhelming majority (64 percent) have no plans to reestablish themselves in their former country (24 percent would, 12 percent are undecided). Some 60 percent also believe that those who have left should not be allowed to simply reclaim homes and properties which they abandoned (33 percent do; 7 percent are uncertain).

Moreover, the sample reveals that Cuban-Americans are sharply divided on so fundamental a question as who should determine the island's political future. Fully 33 percent believe that it should be resolved exclusively by those who have remained behind; 48 percent favor codetermination by the two communities; a mere 8 percent assign this task to the diaspora alone. Significantly, some 79 percent cannot name someone they wish to see as Cuba's next president; even when supplied with a list of probable candidates, the "winner," Jorge Mas Canosa of the Cuban American National Foundation, draws only 44 percent of the vote. (The "runner up," Tony de Varona of the Partido Cubano Revolucionario (Auténtico) receives only 11 percent, and "Don't Know/No Answer" receives 25 percent.) Rather surprisingly in light of the exile community's somewhat unfashionable conservative political image, fully 73 percent

believe that "socialized medicine and free education should continue in democratic Cuba"!

It must be conceded that the situation of Cuba and the exile community is utterly *sui generis*. Other revolutions have generated exile populations in the past, but none of them so large in proportion to population, so heavily concentrated in one geographical area, and so physically proximate. Thus while the United States and the exile leadership may sincerely disavow any intentions of interfering in the internal affairs of post-Castro Cuba, with the collapse of the dictatorship the boundary between the two Cubas threatens to become purely imaginary. This is particularly true in the event of a civil war on the island, towards which not only the Miami Cubans but even the U.S. Government would be hard-pressed to maintain a posture of neutrality.

In a broader sense, however, it is far from clear that a close relationship to the United States, or even codetermination with some elements of the Cuban-American community, is something which most Cubans would find undesirable. Again, we know next to nothing about the islanders' real feelings, only what we are told through sanitized sources. Thus Cuban government officials often speak disdainfully of Puerto Rico, as if that is the only possible relationship which a Caribbean island might have with the United States.<sup>7</sup> And Cubans available for comment to American journalists often speak of "Miami" as if the Cuban-American threat is greater than any other which faces them, including starvation. The vaunted Cuban nationalism to which regime apologists continually refer may dissolve before our eyes once wider options of association—both with the United States and with the Cuban-American community—are available.

### **The Dilemmas of Success.**

It ought to be said straightforwardly that even the most expeditious and peaceful political transition will not resolve all of the Cuban policy dilemmas facing the United States. Quite the contrary: it will merely pose new ones. In the first place, the morning after we are almost certain to see a massive flight of

Cubans from the island, particularly those who already have relatives in the United States. Very early on, therefore, the United States will have to decide whether to discontinue its current policy of granting automatic political asylum to those who succeed in escaping; it will also have to devise methods of implementing that policy. If the U.S.-Mexican border (leave aside the Haitian territorial waters) are any indication, that may prove extraordinarily difficult from a logistical point of view, quite apart from the obvious political controversy which such an event would provoke in Southern Florida and within the Cuban-American community.

Second, the United States will have to make a determination on when the regime has ended, and therefore when to begin normalization of relations. Current policy defines the transition by free elections open to international supervision, but in all probability a fresh leadership, a different discourse, and some moves towards opening up the system would be sufficient to reopen sub-ambassadorial missions and lift some trade and travel restrictions.

Third, the determination of when the transition has begun is bound to become a political and ideological question. Inevitably, Castro's overthrow or collapse will unleash vigorous debate among Cubans, between Cubans on the island and Cuban-Americans in the United States, and between both of them and the U.S. Government over the shape of the new Cuba and its relations with the outside world. There is no way that this conflict can be contained within the boundaries of the island, since Cuba will reenter the Western world in acute need of foreign assistance, the largest single source of which will surely be Miami. On the other hand, it is also true that those Cubans who have remained at home and paid the price for the Castro regime for nearly two generations will naturally feel that the future is theirs to determine, not those who have spent that period in (what to them will seem) more comfortable circumstances. The U.S. Government may not succeed in mediating between the two sundered halves of the national community, but it will be forced to try, since even without the Miami factor, post-Castro Cuba will be ripe for civil conflict.



Fourth and finally, it is by no means assured that in the post-Castro era Cuba will be able to resume its historic relationship with the United States as first among Caribbean equals. Its old quota of sugar imports has been divided up among many other countries and cannot be immediately restored;<sup>8</sup> competitive tourist infrastructures now exist in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and elsewhere; independent tribunals must settle several billion dollars' worth of confiscated American property; and many other Latin American and Caribbean countries will be competing for a special trade relationship with the United States based on geographical proximity, low labor costs, or comparative advantage.

To think seriously about a post-Castro Cuba is to contemplate, then, a series of new problems: a continuing flow of immigration, legal and illegal; political unrest, possibly aggravated by revanchist elements or contending parties based in Florida; heightened commercial competition between Cuba and its neighbors; and in the short term at least, the need for massive infusions of food, medicine and other forms of assistance.

On the other hand, the United States faces this prospect somewhat better equipped than it would have been a decade or two ago. The Democracy Endowment now has experience in more than a dozen Latin American countries; Congress and the State Department have established tighter standards for human rights compliance; other Latin American countries, particularly Venezuela, Mexico and Colombia, seem better disposed to assist the United States than a generation ago; the ideological climate is much cooler and more pragmatic.

In most ways the changes which have occurred in the world over the last few years work in favor of a new and more constructive relationship with post-Castro Cuba. One, however, which does not is the vast demographic and cultural shift which has occurred on the island since 1959. Much of Cuba today is black rather than white, poor rather than rich, passive rather than active, pessimistic rather than hopeful, fearful of the future and nostalgic for a brief moment in the past when all things seemed possible through the catharsis of

revolution. Except for nostalgia (but for 1958 and before, rather than 1959), the Cuban-American community represents precisely the opposite of all of these things. Cuba cannot enter the future without bringing the two halves together, a task which the United States cannot accomplish on its behalf. But it is also a task towards which, for reasons political, historical, and human, the United States cannot remain indifferent. The roots of our own history have been entangled with those of Cuba for 200 years. The prospect of Castro's demise emphasizes the point in a new and dramatic way. It also suggests that U.S. policy should concentrate less on how to oust Fidel—an event which, to repeat, must happen sooner or later—than on how to deal with his doleful legacy once he is gone.

## ENDNOTES

1. Whether there were political motives behind the dismissal is unclear. There have been rumors that Castro Díaz-Balart was in contact with dissidents; but also that he had personal problems and was living *la dolce vita*. Hard evidence is not abundant.

2. Castro could even have it both ways by accepting the principle of normalization, while raising conditions which he would know in advance no American President could accept, at least not without protracted negotiations and Senate approval. One example would be withdrawal from the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo.

3. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Four Days with Fidel: A Havana Diary," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 39, No. 6, March 26, 1992.

4. According to a recent poll conducted among Cuban-American adults in Dade County, Florida, 66 percent favor a policy of "confrontation" with the Castro regime, a mere 23 percent "dialogue." *Miami Herald*, May 2, 1992.

5. It might be argued that since the United States continued to recognize right-wing military governments during the 1970s in countries like Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, it would constitute no departure to normalize relations with Cuba. But in fact during that period the domestic opposition in such places—as well as the human rights community in the United States—always viewed U. S. diplomatic and trade relations (even trade slightly circumscribed by the lack of OPIC guarantees or Eximbank loans) as a virtual endorsement of undemocratic regimes. While such claims were undoubtedly exaggerated, it was also true that the elements of normality in bilateral relations introduced a note of ambivalence which was not always helpful—to say the least—in advancing the overall goals of U.S. policy. On

this subject see Daniel Pipes and Adam Garfinkle, eds., *Friendly Tyrants: An American Dilemma*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

6. Cited in note four.

7. This nicely avoids the possibility that for many inhabitants of the Caribbean (including present-day Cubans) the situation of Puerto Rico—with all its problems—might well be a source of envy.

8. A democratic Cuba would, of course, have a lobby in the United States conceivably stronger than any other sugar-producing area. And the current treatment of U. S. interests by the Philippines suggests that its current share (16 percent of the quota) might be ripe for reallocation.